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EMERGING TOOLS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS: ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS AND THE USE OF WebCT



M.Giatsi¹, M.Nicol¹, J.Gill²

¹Occupational Therapy & Art Therapy Department, Queen Margaret University College (QMUC), Edinburgh, UK;
²Nursing Department, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, UK;

Introduction

The use of the Internet as a medium for conducting research is not a new concept and certainly one that is constantly evolving. The online environment represents numerous opportunities for methodological innovations. Online discussions are a "permutation" of the traditional focus groups, which have been closely associated to qualitative research and the production of rich, textual data relating to the participants' lives and experiences.

Asynchronous Online Discussions (AOD)

Two asynchronous online discussions were employed for the data collection of a three-stage, mixed methods study which aimed at capturing the views of occupational therapists on the difficulties encountered by mainstream school children who were born prematurely. The discussion groups were part of a triangulation process that used and corroborated data from three separate data collection stages (survey, interviews, discussion groups). The discussions were thought to provide a forum for deeper and extended analysis.

Additionally to the traditional advantages of a vis-à-vis focus group, such as assimilating a "real world", naturalistic debate, where people challenge each other's opinions leading to detailed accounts of how they think, online discussions are advantageous as:

- They can automatically be recorded and printed
- Time and cost constraints of travelling and transcribing face-to-face groups are avoided
- They avoid practical issues of bringing together people that are geographically dispersed, and would not have otherwise participated

"Asynchronous" was the online discussion mode of choice. In comparison to "real-time" discussions, asynchronous discussions provide:

- More reflective, extensive responses, as participants take time before answering
- The ability to review prior comments and attend the flow of the discussion; synchronous conversations are very hard to follow due to the difficulty to compose messages while reading, and achieve dialogue that is chronologically linear
- Increased "flexibility" in comparison to the "real-time" discussions; no requirement to find an "ideal" time for all participants to be online

Two independent discussions were held so that group by-group as well as cross-group analysis would be achieved. Moreover, "lessons" learned while conducting the first discussion led to alterations for the second discussion e.g. degree of instructor participation

Technical infrastructure & Functionality of WebCT

WebCT is a program that was designed to create a web based e-learning environment although it was soon suggested that it could facilitate any other online engagement or interaction among participants for research purposes. Favourable research evidence on its user friendliness along with the fact that it is not required from participants to have any specific software other than a web browser such as Internet Explorer, made it the tool of choice.

WebCT was loaded onto a central server (QMUC) and the participants were given a URL address which could be accessed by any computer with Internet connection.

Thirteen participants that had previously completed the questionnaire and had volunteered to take part in the sequential discussion groups, were selected and allocated into two groups. Usernames and passwords were emailed to the participants by QMUC's WebCT administrator, after receiving their consent, and one week before the discussions commenced. The identity of the participants remained unknown throughout the course of the discussions unless they decided differently.

Functionality of WebCT was implemented by providing a "closed" online area with a multi-threaded discussion board where the participants could post their messages as responses to the discussion topics, or, as responses to other participants' thoughts. In this fashion, interaction was facilitated. "Threads" were created as messages followed from each other as replies to preceding ones, and chronologically sequenced dialogue was facilitated.

Messages were visible to all participants and could also be in the form of attached files, such as Word documents, pfd files or graphics.

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
Introductions	0	10	public, unlocked
1st topic	0	14	public, unlocked
Summarising the 1st topic	0	3	public, unlocked
2nd topic	0	19	public, unlocked
Summarising the 2nd topic	0	2	public, unlocked
3rd topic	0	23	public, unlocked
Summarising the 3rd topic	0	2	public, unlocked
4th topic	0	16	public, unlocked
Summarising the 4th topic	0	1	public, unlocked
All	0	90	---

Additionally to the main "discussion Board" feature, WebCT was used for "content delivery", such as document posting and sharing files with participants, something that eventually led to a "resource bank". An evaluation tool was also created for the final assessment of the WebCT experience at the completion of the discussions.

Home Page

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Occupational therapists' perceptions of pretermchildren's academic difficulties in the early years of mainstream schooling

Resources Discussion WebCT Help WebCT Evaluation

New

"Dear all! WebCT has officially come to an end today. It will still be LIVE for some last comments and for you to read the summary of the 4th topic till Monday morning (13/10/06). From then onwards you username/ password will no longer be valid. For the ones that have not done so, I would appreciate it if you could complete the evaluation form that you can find in the "WebCT evaluation" area. Once again I wanted to thank you for your valuable contribution. Hopefully you have enjoyed the experience! All the best for the future!!!!!!"

Maria Giatsi
mjgiatsi@qmuc.ac.uk

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns were addressed that were relevant to the confidentiality of the posted messages, the anonymity of the participants and the disclosure of WebCT account details. Ethical approval was granted by the Multi-Research Ethics Committee of London and the Research & Development Departments of the 13 employing Trusts of the participants. A consent form signed by the participants, bound them to an acceptable use of WebCT as this was defined by the "Conditions of Use" of QMUC's WebCT Administration.

Conclusion

Live, spontaneous narration of face-to-face communication was compared to the production of elaborated written responses of AODs. Deep understanding of participants' views was thought to be enhanced by the elaboration and justification that the pace of a written message would allow. WebCT offered the online platform for these discussions.